

Why Are Christians So Intolerant?



Sometimes Apologies Are Needed

It's true that a bad messenger can ruin a good message. It's also true that each and every one of us is an ambassador for some kind of worldview. Some of us are theists and some of us are atheists. Some of us are capitalists and some of us are socialists. Some of us are UCLA fans and some of us are USC fans! And all of us have had experiences with people who are so obnoxious that we resist them personally and we resist the worldview that they hold. Character DOES matter, and when we meet someone who is a complete jerk, it's our natural tendency to reject everything that they stand for.

Christians are not immune from bad behavior. Like everyone else, Christians are humans with all the 'upside' and 'downside' that their humanness can bring to the conversation. Yes, there are many obnoxious and obstinate Christians out there, but there are also obnoxious people in EVERY worldview. The question is: "Are Christians particularly intolerant compared to other folks?" And, if so, why are they more inclined to be intolerant? Well, as it turns out, the perception that Christians are intolerant is driven by two realities: the nature of truth and the definition of tolerance. Let's take a look at how these two realities impact our perceptions of Christians...



It's All About the Nature of Truth

In a world where relativism and pluralism reign, it's sometimes hard to think of truth as an objective, absolute reality. The view that absolute truth exists and can be known is a rather 'modern' notion, and we are currently living in a 'post-modern' world that rejects such rigidity. Now think about this for a minute. There are two possibilities about the nature of truth and each possibility results in a different response:

There Is No Absolute Truth

If all truth is simply a point of view, then there is really no sense in getting uptight about the point of view that YOU might hold. After all, the other person's point of view is equally valid and no more 'absolute' than yours! In a world like this, there is no sense in making a fuss over what you believe and trying to convince someone else that they should adopt your view. Their 'truth' works for them and your 'truth' works for you! You may both diagnose a particular problem in the same way, yet come to two different views about the cure for that problem. If neither view is absolutely true, your cure for that problem is no better than theirs. Everyone should leave everyone else alone.

Absolute Truth Does Exist

If, on the other hand, absolute truth DOES exist, one cure for the particular problem you have diagnosed might, in fact, be the absolute, TRUE cure. If this is the case, the person holding this truth has a moral responsibility to try to influence others to accept the truth! In a world where absolute truths exist, it makes great sense to try to influence others with the truth. In this kind of world, error exists and must be confronted as a SERVICE to others. To 'leave everyone else alone' is to allow them to continue in a false reality.

Now you can see that your view of truth WILL impact the way you share that truth with others. Christians believe that absolute truth exists, and as a result, they are more likely to try to share that 'truth' with the world around them. This doesn't mean they have liberty to be complete jerks in the way that they make their case, but to be honest, in a world where absolute truth is denied, ANY attempt to make a case for a particular truth will likely be seen as an intolerant gesture. This has less to do with the possible intolerance of the messenger than it has to do with the perception of truth that is held by the culture!



The New Definition of Tolerance

In light of the way that our world has come to see the relative nature of truth, it should come as no surprise that the definition of 'tolerance' has changed in the last generation. Let's take a look at the classic and 'accepted' definitions of 'tolerance' and how the changing definition of this term impacts the way that Christians are perceived.

The Classic Definition of Tolerance

YourDictionary.com says that tolerance is "a tolerating or being tolerant, esp. of views, beliefs, practices, etc. of others that differ from one's own". And when asked what it is to tolerate something, the same source says that we 'tolerate' someone when we "recognize and respect (others' beliefs, practices, etc.) without sharing them".

TheFreeDictionary.com says that 'tolerating' is "to put up with" or "endure" something.

Now did you notice something here? In order for 'tolerance' to exist and to be demonstrated, several things are required. Let's take a look at the list of pre-requisites for 'tolerance':

- 1. Two or more people must exist*
- 2. These folks must hold divergent views, beliefs or practices. In other words, they must DISAGREE.*
- 3. These same folks must endure one another. In other words, they cannot eliminate each other even though they don't embrace each other's beliefs, but must instead find a way to peacefully co-exist.*

You see, 'tolerance', under this classic view, requires a disagreement. Without the disagreement, 'tolerance' is not even possible. Now let's take a look at the new accepted view of tolerance that has emerged in our relativistic culture in which absolute truth either does not exist or cannot be known.

The Current, Accepted Definition of Tolerance

Websters-Online-Dictionary.com begins to hint at the subtle shift in definition when it describes 'tolerance' as "a disposition to allow freedom of choice and behavior." In its 'Declaration on the Principles of Tolerance', the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines 'tolerance' as "respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human."

Notice the shift? The concept (and the actual word) 'acceptance' has been added to the definition in a way that subtly transforms the classic definition. This view promotes not that we must 'endure' each other in the context of our disagreements, but that we must 'accept' and

embrace each other's worldview as equally valuable and equally true. This current definition of 'tolerance' could be stated in the following way:

Tolerance: The act of recognizing and accepting the equal validity and value of all views, beliefs and actions

This definition of 'tolerance' leans heavily on its relativistic view of the truth. No absolute truth exists or can be known (all truth has equal value); therefore nothing is absolutely wrong. As a result, no view, belief or practice is absolutely true or valuable, and conversely, no view, belief or practice is absolutely untrue or without value. But think about this for a second. This view of 'tolerance' cannot live up to its own standard. What if I hold (and practice) the view and belief that 'all views, beliefs and actions are NOT equally valid and valuable'? Could the new definition of 'tolerance' tolerate my position? No, clearly my position would be the one position that would have to be abolished in order for this definition of 'tolerance' to be true, but to abolish my view entirely would be to break the definition itself. You see, this view of tolerance simply cannot stand up under the weight of its own standard. The world presently embraces a view of 'tolerance' that is illogical, unsustainable and self refuting. And this is a dilemma for the Christian.



Why Christians Seem Intolerant

Christians often seem intolerant in our current culture, and this is not necessarily due to any inappropriate behavior on their part. Christians hold to the classic definition of truth and tolerance, two definitions that have been largely jettisoned by the culture. Christians believe that there is an absolute objective truth that can be understood, and that it is a virtue when we can get along with others by 'agreeing to disagree'. But if disagreement is not allowed and agreement is the only currently acceptable form of tolerance, then Christians find themselves in a dilemma. If we, as Christians, are required to agree that objective truth does NOT exist and that all views are equally valid and valuable, we are left with few options aside from silence.

Now there are certainly some Christians in our culture that appear more 'tolerant' than others, but it is seldom because they behave in a more loving manner. It is usually because they are willing to accept the culture's relativistic view of truth and tolerance. Yet as we have already examined, this requires us to deny the truth about truth, something that not all of us are willing to do. So, we are in the delicate and difficult position of having to help define the truth in classical terms so we can return the culture to the classic view of tolerance.



But, Didn't Jesus Tell Us to Be Tolerant?

Sometimes non-believers who have a limited view of the scriptures will point to Jesus' own words to make a case for the universal acceptance of all truth claims. They will typically dig into their partial memory of fragmented Bible verses to recall that Jesus said:

Matthew 7:1

"Do not judge so that you will not be judged."

In reciting this verse, non-believers are typically arguing that we, as Christians are not to judge others as incorrect; we are instead to embrace all positions as equally valid. This view of Jesus and his teaching has become very popular even among those Christians who are

heavily influenced by our culture. But to focus on Jesus' words here and to ignore the rest of the passage distorts Jesus' position related to truth and tolerance. Let's skip down just a few verses and read what Jesus has to say:

Matthew 7:13-29

"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it. Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles? And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness. Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell--and great was its fall.'" When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Yes, it is true that Jesus told his followers not to judge, but then, within just a few verses, Jesus clearly makes several dramatic judgments. Let's summarize some of Jesus' judgmental statements:

- 1. The path to truth is narrow. Truth is exclusive; not everyone will accept it*
- 2. Some things are good, some things are bad. The truth is not subjective, an objective truth exists about right and wrong*
- 3. Some things are wise and some things are foolish. This too is not a matter of opinion, and it is not open to debate. There is an objective truth about wisdom and foolishness, even if some would deny that this is the case*
- 4. Some teachings are more authoritative than others. This could not be true unless objective truth exists*

So, how can Jesus say that we are not to judge people and then be so judgmental, just a few verses later? Well, He is simply operating under the classic definition of tolerance. Jesus teaches us that we are to judge between ideas and teachings, and that we are to resist bad ideas and false notions. At the same time, we are not to treat people poorly. We can deny the truth of their ideas without denying their humanity and their right to be treated with love. In other words, we can love people without embracing their ideas. This is the classic definition of tolerance and exactly what Jesus was talking about in Matthew Chapter 7.



Holding Fast Until the World Returns

Cultural philosophies are rather faddish and temporary. A time may yet come when our culture returns to the modernist notion of truth and tolerance; after all, these classic definitions don't suffer from self-refutation or other logical fallacies or contradictions. In the meantime, it's important for Christians to be patient and understand the world in which they live. It's important for Christians to love the people in their world, even if they reject their ideas.